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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dragoman, D., Luca, S.-A., & Gheorghită, B. (2016). In defence of local identity: cultural factors and actors' strategy during regionalization in Romania. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 16(3), 331-356. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-51695-1>

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In Defence of Local Identity Cultural Factors and Actors' Strategy During Regionalization in Romania

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As one can frequently notice, regionalization is never free of political strategies. When asked to complete such a complex process, politicians and parties generally take into account electoral issues and look for political advantages. Changing the regional structure means also bringing changes in the political distribution and in the electoral competition at local and regional level. But parties and governments also face another type of challenges when it comes to put in place complex regionalization processes. This is the resistance of local structures. The resistance can be driven by political and economic reasons, of course, but also by another factor, namely the defence of local identity. As regionalization involves defining a new administrative layer and sharing competences, it requires a territorial dimension which is always subject to contestation.

The aim of the article is to focus on the territorial dimension of regionalization and to emphasize the importance of competing political geographies. How to draw the regional units and how to regroup existing smaller units into bigger units is never free of contestation from local structures and actors. This contestation is an essential factor in the bottom-up processes of decentralization, but it very often works as an inhibitory factor when contesting top-down decisions. This is visible in Romania, which inherited a long lasting tradition of administrative centralization, and largely imitated the centralization efforts of the French republic and thus has been confronted with the cultural homogenization of the national territory, following its independence in 1877¹. In the same time, Romania is a EU member state, subject to political influence of the EU regional policies and other European regionalization models. Even one cannot clearly identify a EU conditionality pushing towards regionalization, recent Romanian tendencies for stronger regionalization are in connexion with governmental interests for boosting spending the EU cohesion funds. Therefore,

¹ K. Hitchins, *Romania, 1866-1947*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994.

the more general East European context of regionalization and its complex pattern of diffusion is taken into account.

The article intends to weight the comparative importance of the competing geographies for the advance of the current regionalization process in Romania, which is somehow different from the French case, since the regionalization seems to be seriously hampered by the indecision of successive governments, who did not take the electoral risk to favour a given map against other competing maps and postponed regionalization for almost two decades². From this perspective, regionalization is mainly understood here as a political geographical process of reshaping inner borders, as an effort to redesign regional units. A separate discussion has to be introduced on the substance of regionalization, with a special emphasis on changing competences for the newly created regional units. In Romania, the incipient debate focused rather on the geographical aspect, turning the more complicated and abstract aspect of decentralization as a second step and a secondary issue. The political deadlock regarding reshaping the regional units led to postponing regionalization and gave no real chance to a serious debate regarding future competences for sub-national units. The reasons for postponing effective regionalization in Romania are multi-fold³. Governments found themselves in an uncomfortable situation every time they tried to push forward the regionalization process, facing administrative, European, electoral and ethnic types of conditionality. In the most recent phase of regionalization, after the 2012 general elections which provided the government with a strong parliamentary majority, the government faced a problem never seriously taken into account during the early stages of regionalization, which is the defence of local identity by local actors who disputed the drawing of the new regional maps. The electoral costs deriving from the contestation, alongside other coalition problems occurring in 2013, made the government to postpone regionalization once again.

The present analysis of the Romanian case sheds new light on the complex process of redesigning and rescaling regional government in countries with a certain centralization tradition. It shows that even the highly centralized states have to take somehow into account local identities and contestations that arise, at least by altering the political-administrative decision, if not by postponing it in favour of a long lasting *status-quo*. In this inquiry, Romania exemplifies the decisive influence of the French administrative model and highlights its strengths and weaknesses when facing sensitive local identity issues. Moreover, the article opens a new perspective on the regionalization process analysis in

² D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghîță, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle: Romania's Syncopated Regionalization", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2016, pp. 270-290.

³ *Idem*, "European Conditionality, Ethnic Control or Electoral Disarray? The 2011 Controversial Territorial Reform Attempt in Romania", *Polis*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 72-93.

Romania by proposing a model of actors' interaction between local ground and central government level. This model might help understand the forthcoming regionalization renewed effort in 2017, following the fall 2016 parliamentary elections.

Decentralization in a Highly Centralized State

The development and consolidation of local governments is today a common feature not only in Western democracies⁴, but in developing countries as well. Especially nowadays, in the context of globalization that affects developing countries⁵, local identities are at the heart of political transformations⁶. Those countries have to take into account decentralization and even regionalization when it comes to tackle important issues as the performance of local government, strategic planning, economic development and the relations with the European Union (top-down factors), as well as regional mobilization, democratization and the involvement of regional elites (bottom-up factors) that finally transform government in governance⁷. Additionally, there are a series of conditions influencing local and regional governments, which pertain to the unification of the national territory and the consolidation of a central government, making them capable of insuring the territorial national unity. In this respect, Romania largely used the French centralized model of territorial control and governance⁸. For decades, this was the model used by Romanian national elites in order to integrate provinces once belonging to regional empires (Turkish, Austrian and Russian) into a unitary state⁹. It will take almost a century and the favourable political context of the European integration for Romania to adopt a more flexible regional design.

Although France moved away from the tough centralist regime in the 1980s, Romania did not follow. In France, decentralization was made in brutal and comprehensive manner¹⁰ for several reasons, but mainly for breaking the cycle of the welfare state mentality, to boost the industrial and urban development and revitalize the periphery in political, administrative and

⁴ P. John, *Local Governance in Western Europe*, Sage, London, 2001.

⁵ J. Harris, K. Stokke, O. Tornquist, (eds.), *Politicising Democracy: The New Local Politics of Democratisation*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2005.

⁶ L. Pratchett, "Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the 'New Localism'", *Political Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2004, pp. 358-375.

⁷ P. John, *Local Governance...cit.*, p. 123.

⁸ L. Boia, *Romania: Borderland of Europe*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001.

⁹ I. Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1995.

¹⁰ J.C. Thoenig, "Territorial Administration and Political Control. Decentralization in France", *Public Administration*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2005, pp. 685-708.

economic terms¹¹. Despite the French example, Romania favoured the previous French centralist model because this model was better suited to Romania's nation and state-building efforts. Modern Romania was created in 1918 by binding together provinces inhabited in large numbers by ethnic Romanians. Those provinces were previously part of multi-national empires which dominated the region for centuries. When Transylvania and Banat finally separated from Austria-Hungary in December 1918 on the basis of the self-determination legitimate principle¹², a long process of state-building was in fact coming to an end. Before that, Wallachia and Moldova declared their independence from the Ottoman empire in 1877 and formed the Kingdom of Romania, alongside Dobruja, ceded by Russia in 1878 following the peace Treaty of San Stefano in exchange of territories in Southern Bessarabia. Early on in 1918, Bessarabia and Bucovina separated from the Russian empire and from Austria-Hungary, respectively¹³. When state-building was over, nation-building became the pivotal process that accompanied social and economic modernization. The new provinces brought in not only many ethnic Romanians once separated by the borders of the previous multinational empires, but large ethnic and religious minorities, with more urbanized, educated and active cultural elites¹⁴. The aim of Romanian national elites would be for decades the consolidation of the inchoate national state by homogenizing the political space, unifying the national culture and defining citizenship¹⁵. This task even combined with building state socialism¹⁶, which turned late communism in Romania into a ethno-nationalist, patrimonial and sultanistic regime¹⁷, despite the initial promise for the perfect equality between workers and peasants, with no reference to their ethnic background¹⁸.

The question of regional autonomy for ethnic Hungarians is since then at the heart of the regionalization process in Romania. Throughout the 20th

¹¹ N. Vlahos, "The Politics of Subnational Decentralization in France, Brazil, and Italy", *Journal of Public Deliberation*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1-27.

¹² K. Hitchins, *The Rumanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1780-1849*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1969.

¹³ K. Hitchins, *Romania, 1866-1947*, cit.

¹⁴ I. Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania...*cit.

¹⁵ D. Dragoman, "National Identity and Europeanization in Post-Communist Romania. The Meaning of Citizenship in Sibiu: European Capital of Culture 2007", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2008, pp. 63-78.

¹⁶ K. Jowitt, *Revolutionary Breakthroughs and National Development: The Case of Romania, 1944-1965*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1971.

¹⁷ J.J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1996.

¹⁸ C. Chen, "The Roots of Illiberal Nationalism in Romania: A Historical Institutional Analysis of the Leninist Legacy", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2003, pp. 166-201.

century, tensions between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians in Transylvania have been based on perpetual and parallel fears for secession, on the one side, for slow and painful assimilation on the other side¹⁹. Despite the trauma of World War II and the temporary annexation of a large part of Transylvania by the fascist Hungarian government (1940-1945)²⁰ and despite the legacy of the Romanian overtly nationalist communist regime under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1974-1989)²¹, ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians in Transylvania managed after 1989 to set up a peaceful cohabitation accompanied by a gradual improvement of minority rights²². Regarding administrative issues, the post-communist *status-quo* is based on the acceptance of minority linguistic rights²³, on the one hand, and the conservation of the framework of the centralist system and limited local autonomy, on the other hand. The *status-quo* and the weak incentives for overpassing the deadlock played an essential role during regionalization, from the first steps in the 1990s to the more serious negotiations in 2011, which finally ended with the same status-quo in place²⁴.

Turning back to regional units, the current design originates in the communist project of unifying national territory, which was expressed by reshaping the territorial administration in 1968. On the one hand, the communist project was aimed at limiting the regional economic development gap it inherited from pre-communist times²⁵. It is worth underlining that, back in 1918, the new provinces brought in not only important national minorities, but

¹⁹ E. Illyés, *National Minorities in Romania: Change in Transylvania*, East European Monographs, Boulder CO, 1982; L. Boia, *Cum s-a românizat România*, Humanitas, București, 2015.

²⁰ The partition of Transylvania was made in 1940 by Nazi Germany as a compromise for the territorial quarrel between fascist Romania and fascist Hungary, which were Hitler's allies at the time. See also D. Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and his Regime, 1940-1944*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006.

²¹ K. Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*, California University Press, Berkeley CA, 1995.

²² M. Robotin, L. Salat, (eds.), *A New Balance: Democracy and Minorities in Post-Communist Europe*, LIGI Books, Budapest, 2003; D. Dragoman, "Ethnic Relations in Mixed Communities: Why the Context is Important for the Way Romanians Interact with Minorities after 1989", *Südosteuropa – Journal of Politics and Society*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2015, pp. 136-156.

²³ M. Călușer, *Carta europeană a limbilor regionale sau minoritare în România. Între norme și practici*, Ethnocultural Diversity Resource Center Press, Cluj-Napoca, 2009; D. Dragoman, "Linguistic Pluralism and Citizenship in Romania", in D. Richter, I. Richter, I. Ulasiuk, R. Toivanen, (eds.), *Language Rights Revisited*, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, Berlin, 2012, pp. 267-280.

²⁴ D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghită, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle...cit."

²⁵ D. Chirot, (ed.), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*, California University Press, Berkeley CA, 1989.

regions with different development levels. Not only Transylvania was more ethnically heterogeneous, but it was more industrialized and urbanized, contrasting with more rural and agrarian Romania. Therefore, economic homogenization through rough industrialization and forced urbanization accompanied territorial design during communist times. On the other hand, the 1968 design was putting an end to a previous limited regional autonomy enjoyed by ethnic Hungarians under the umbrella of an autonomous region in Transylvania. This region was created after 1948 by the communist regime itself, in order to emphasize the unity of Romanian and Hungarian workers and peasants, equally engaged in building state socialism.

Despite numerous and profound changes brought by post-communism in political, social and economic areas, the regional design remained untouched after 1989. The current settings still display social economic disparities, despite the state efforts made during the communist rule. The United Nations Development Programme in Romania (UNDP) issued several reports on human development, noticing the existing regional gaps. In spite of recent important rates of economic growth and performance, the economic development has not activated faster and more equitable human development progress²⁶. Moreover, economic growth has not been even across and within regions²⁷, with different potential and forecast performance for the future. With regard to future development of the regions, UNDP divides counties in four categories. First, those which are located in Transylvania (development regions Center and West) and Bucharest, the capital city, and which seem to have better opportunities for expanding economic and human development, defined by large and urban localities, dynamic economic conditions and diverse production structures, low unemployment rates and better chances to generate their own resources. Second, counties from regions with great potential, but with limited growth, as it is the case with development region North West in Transylvania and region South-East in Wallachia and Dobruja. These are large urban counties where economic growth has occurred, but at slower rates and on a smaller scale, yet they are average in terms of unemployment rates and development indicators. Third, counties from region South in Wallachia, defined by greater disparities, with growing or unstable unemployment rates, low productivity, decreasing levels of life expectancy and lower educational achievement. Finally, the fourth category, counties from region South-West in Wallachia and especially region North-East in Moldova, counties with contracting opportunities and little growth, higher levels of unemployment, low human development indicators and widening

²⁶ UNDP Romania, *National Human Development Report 2003-2005 for Romania*, UNDP, București, 2005; UNDP Romania, *National Human Development Report – Romania*, 2007, UNDP, București, 2007.

²⁷ European Commission, *Growing Regions, Growing Europe: Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2007.

disparities regarding educational attainment²⁸. The development perspective may explain, therefore, the conflict of actors when it comes to set up the composition of future regions, as well as their capital-cities. The picture of regional development disparities combine with ethnic-based issues in the argumentation of those actors, making regionalization in Romania a difficult process.

Regionalization in Central and Eastern Europe and EU Conditionality

In Central and Eastern Europe, regionalization could have been perceived as one of the areas where the European Union conditionality be highly salient. As noticed by researchers, the scope of EU conditionality is far larger for the East European countries than for their Mediterranean predecessors²⁹. During negotiations, candidate countries had to harmonize legislation with EU standards, namely with a vast range of rules, regulations and agreements concerning numerous policy domains. The necessity to implement the bulk of standards, known as the *acquis communautaire*, could have suggested at the very beginning that public administration would fall within the scope of EU conditionality. Noticing the unprecedented power asymmetries between the EU and East Central European countries through the *acquis communautaire*, it was expected that regional governance reform would fit into a broader process of Europeanization³⁰. The different trajectories and outcomes of the reform in different countries from the region may suggest that EU conditionality is more elastic as previously thought³¹, especially when external incentives compete with internal constraints. From this perspective, Romania is a good example for the limits of EU conditionality. Without denying conditionality, the visible limits of external constraints demonstrate the fluid nature of conditionality and the weakness of a clear-cut causal relationship between conditionality and outcome in this particular area³².

²⁸ UNDP Romania, *National Human Development Report 2003-2005 for Romania*, cit., p. 71.

²⁹ A. Grzymala-Busse, A. Innes, "Great Expectations: The EU and Domestic Political Competition in East Central Europe", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2003, pp. 64-73.

³⁰ C. O'Dwyer, "Reforming Regional Governance in East Central Europe: Europeanization or Domestic Politics as Usual?", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, pp. 219-253.

³¹ M. Czernielewska, C.J. Paraskevopoulos, J. Szlachta, "The Regionalization Process in Poland: An Example of 'Shallow' Europeanization?", *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2004, pp. 461-495.

³² J. Hughes, G. Sasse, C. Gordon, "Conditionality and Compliance in the EU's Eastward Enlargement: Regional Policy and the Reform of Sub-national Government", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2004, pp. 523-551.

With the EU accession in mind, and focusing on the EU regional policy benefits, or simply trying to adapt regional institutions to increasing competition on the consolidating market, several countries from Central and Eastern Europe decided to redesign regional administration. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia managed to achieve regional reforms³³. In accordance to the EU conditionality perspective³⁴, they also largely benefited from the EU structural funds, distributed through regional policies by the regions themselves. Those countries have responded to the EU demands for changes in order to implementing the EU regional policy, namely mechanisms for inter-ministerial communication, capacity for monitoring and implementing policy, adoption of a national development plan, the adoption of the European territorial statistical system (NUTS), but also for the clear involvement of regional-level actors in making regional policy³⁵.

Despite the clear-cut causal relationship between direct EU conditionality and outcome in the process of regionalization, an effect of the administrative and economic performance of Central European countries, due to regional reshape, on Romanian regional compliance is to be taken into account. In these terms, one can even speak about a regionalization diffusion process, with Romania witnessing the effect of more successful regional policies. In fact, one can point out the use of the EU severe conditionality argument in Romania during the regionalization debate in 2011. Then the Democrat-Liberal party on government tried to persuade both its governing coalition partner (the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians) and parties from the opposition that regionalization is inevitable under EU constraint and should be done quickly, in order to maximize EU membership and direct structural funding³⁶. However, coalition bargaining ended in failure, as underlined below, leaving in place a long lasting *status-quo* on the matter of regionalization.

Romanian Regionalization in Slow-Motion

Regionalization in Romania is a very slow process. Moreover, its trajectory is far from being linear. Depending of pressing factors, regionalization can

³³ M. Ferry, "From Government to Governance: Polish Regional Development Agencies in a Changing Regional Context", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, pp. 447-474.

³⁴ M. Brusis, "The Instrumental Use of European Union Conditionality: Regionalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2005, pp. 291-316.

³⁵ C. O'Dwyer, "Reforming Regional Governance in East Central Europe...cit.", p. 227.

³⁶ D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghîă, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle...cit.".

boost for a short period of time only to rest for many long years before favourable factors work again. Those factors range from political indecision due to outcome uncertainty and electoral issues³⁷, to ethnic factors pertaining to the autonomy status of regions inhabited by large ethnic minorities as the Hungarians living in Transylvania³⁸.

The regionalization process began in 1997, with the new regions designed mainly for complying to the European Union basic requirements in the perspective of future EU accession negotiations, but with no real willingness to empower the new regional units³⁹. Unlike other former communist states in the region, as Poland, the Czech Republic or Slovakia, which endowed new regions with varying competences⁴⁰, Romania limited regionalization to territorial statistical reporting and monitoring. Since 1997, regions in Romania are not legal persons, but merely statistical regrouping of existing counties. One of the main reasons for this is that the Constitution in place acknowledges the county as the largest regional unit. The incipient regionalization was not conceived as a process of decentralization, with the perspective of full autonomy of the new regions. It was rather a development tool, used by the government as preparation for the future EU financial structural aid and as a compliance with the European territorial statistical system (NUTS). This represents a clear government strategy of creating functional regional structures for administrative and statistical purposes, without devolving real competences to the newly created regional entities⁴¹. The new development regions are since then run by Regional Development Councils and Agencies, under the general coordination of a National Council for Regional Development and of a specialized Ministry for Regional Development and European integration. Agencies and the subsequent regional policies they coordinate at regional level are financed by a

³⁷ A.M. Dobre, "The Dynamics of Partisan Adaptation to Europeanization: The Romanian Case of Regionalization", paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Session of Workshops, Granada, Spain, 14-19 April 2005; D. Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralization and the Performance of Local Governments in Post-Communist Romania", *Local Government Studies*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2011, pp. 647-669; A. Zamfira, "Methodological Limitations in Studying the Effect of (Inter)ethnicity on Voting Behaviour, with Examples from Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia", *Erdkunde*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2015, pp. 161-173; D. Alexandru, "Decentralization and Territorial Development in Romania. Trends and Challenges", *Lex Localis – Journal of Local Self-Government*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2016, pp. 475-494.

³⁸ D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghişă, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle...cit.".

³⁹ D. Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralization...cit.".

⁴⁰ C. O'Dwyer, "Reforming Regional Governance in East Central Europe...cit."; J.A. Yoder, "Leading the Way to Regionalization in Post-Communist Europe: An Examination of the Process and Outcomes of Regional Reform in Poland", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, pp. 424-446.

⁴¹ A.M. Dobre, "The Dynamics of Partisan Adaptation to Europeanization...cit.".

Regional Development Fund, fuelled mainly by the national budget and the EU financial contribution. Agencies are not legal persons, but non-profit and non-governmental organizations which project, implement and overview development policies at regional level. In this respect, Romanian regionalization is closer to the Turkish mechanism of development based on regional development agencies⁴² than to the Polish shift towards regional governance⁴³.

Table 1

The County Composition of Development Regions

| Regions | Counties |
|---------------------------|--|
| Region 1, North-East | Bacău (BC), Botoșani (BT), Neamț (NT), Iași (IS), Suceava (SV), Vaslui (VS) |
| Region 2, South-East | Brăila (BR), Buzău (BZ), Constanța (CT), Galați (GL), Tulcea (TL), Vrancea (VN) |
| Region 3, South | Argeș (AG), Călărași (CL), Dâmbovița (DB), Giurgiu (GR), Ialomița (IL), Prahova (PH), Teleorman (TR) |
| Region 4, South-West | Dolj (DJ), Gorj (GJ), Mehedinți (MH), Olt (OT), Vâlcea (VL) |
| Region 5, West | Arad (AR), Caraș-Severin (CS), Hunedoara (HD), Timiș (TM) |
| Region 6, North-West | Bihor (BH), Bistrița-Năsăud (BN), Cluj (CJ), Maramureș (MM), Satu-Mare (SM), Sălaj (SJ) |
| Region 7, Center | Alba (AB), Brașov (BV), Covasna (CV), Harghita (HR), Mureș (MS), Sibiu (SB) |
| Region 8, Bucharest-Ilfov | Bucharest (B), Ilfov (IF) |

The regrouping of the counties made back in 1997 was made by using several criteria, mainly the potential for cooperation between counties and the variation in development indices at that moment. The purpose for regrouping the counties into larger development regions was to create a potential for development by including central and peripheral sub-regions. Thus each peripheral sub-region, which display human development indices below the national average, could benefit of the positive influence of central regions. They

⁴² A. Lagendijk, S. Kayasu, S. Yasar, "The Role of Regional Development Agencies in Turkey. From Implementing EU Directives to Supporting Regional Business Communities?", *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2009, pp. 383-396.

⁴³ M. Ferry, "From Government to Governance...cit."

might therefore be considered as a priority area for future intervention and a target for future development actions⁴⁴. The regrouping used additional geographical and historical criteria. An important limitation in drawing the new development regions was that they do not overpass the borders of historical regions, wherever it was possible. The limitation was overruled only in the creation of Region 2 (South-East), where regrouping counties put together parts of former historical regions Moldova (VN, TL), Wallachia (BR, BZ) and Dobruja (CT, TL) and in the shaping of Region 5 (West), where southern parts of the former Principality of Transylvania (HD) have been mixed with the whole former historical region of Banat (TM, AR, CS). The limitation to not trespass historical regional borders has to be seen as an effort to respect historical differences and specificities, after decades of harsh territorial and cultural homogenization put in place by the late communist regime, which spared no effort in building a single and unified socialist nation of workers and peasants.

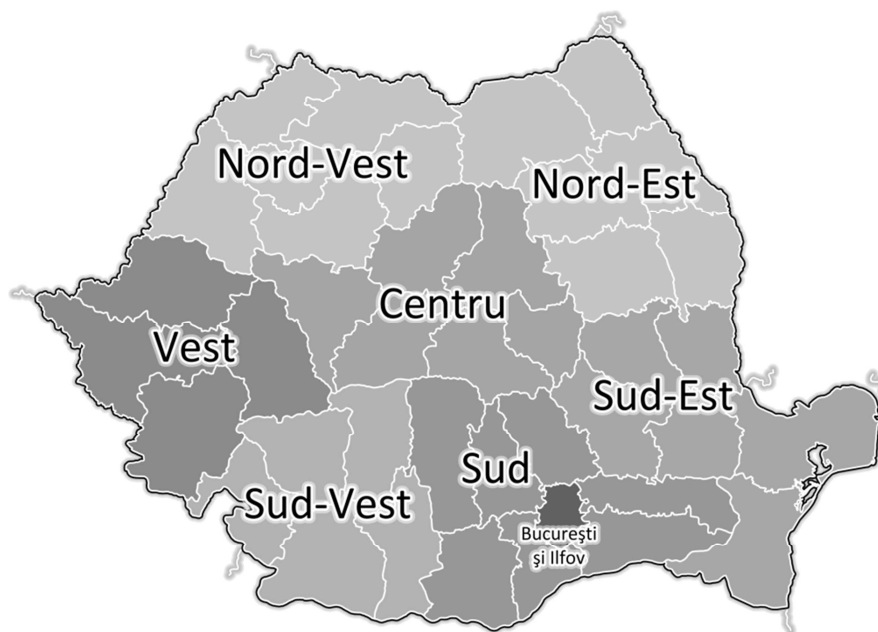


Figure 1. Development Regions in Romania⁴⁵

⁴⁴ T. Hansen, I. Ianoș, G. Pascariu, V. Platon, D. Sandu, *Profiles of the Romanian Development Regions*, Ramboll Consultancy Group, București, 1997.

⁴⁵ Map available at <http://www.oirposdru-vest.ro>, accessed 12 July 2016.

Combined with the cooperation potential criterion, the regionalization gave birth to geographical units that worked for more than a decade as statistical units. The lack of institutional performance of the existing counties and the incapacity of Romania to attract and spend the EU development funds, combined with other political internal issues, made the central government once again in 2012-2013 to restart the process of regionalization by proposing a division of the eight current development regions into smaller units.

How to Redraw Regional Units? Local Actors, Local Identities and Interests

Despite the fact that development regions never worked as regional units and the EU funding was mainly spent by various ministry mechanisms of redistribution from the central government directly to local authorities, bureaus of Regional Development Agencies have been established in cities from the seven regions as headquarters for future regional authorities. Because those cities are the capital-cities of various counties (Piatra Neamț – NT for Region 1, Brăila – BR for Region 2, Călărași – CL for Region 3, Craiova – DJ for Region 4, Timișoara – TM for Region 5, Cluj-Napoca, Alba-Iulia – AB for Region 7, and Bucharest for Region 8), they become the capitals of development regions. Since the regionalization was made in 1997 on the basis of a pure central government decision, redrawing regional units in 2012-2013 meant regrouping counties, or negotiating new capital-cities for those regional units. With future consistent competences for development regions, setting up the location for regional capitals could be an economic incentive for future investment. The actors most active in disputing capitals for regions were the authorities from most similar counties, in terms of economic and cultural profiles, which put forward a large array of arguments why their county capital-city should host the central office of the Regional Development Agency in the region. Their publically expressed arguments are analysed below, with an emphasis on the conflicting logic of alternative geographies put forward.

When the development regions were created back in 1997, they were designed to engulf cultural areas, defined as special regional units, regrouping of counties with similar socio-cultural profile, including social capital⁴⁶. A cultural area is defined by composing counties characteristics, namely rural development, urban development, share of orthodox religion believers, share of arable land, and belonging to a given historical region. By aggregating those variables, Sandu notices that counties tend to be similar by economic and

⁴⁶ D. Sandu. "Ariile culturale ale României", *Sociologie Românească*, vol. 1, nos. 3-4, 1990, pp. 295-306.

cultural profiles⁴⁷. The cluster analysis run by Sandu by grouping counties underlined a number of core areas, with large probability of prediction, as well as less structured cultural areas. For the first cases, the structural ties are so strong, that they cannot be easily unnoticed. Those core areas are TR-GR-IL-CL, BT-VS, CV-HR, BV-SB, SJ-BN. Therefore, those core cultural areas have been used as nucleus for regrouping counties into development regions, whereas less structured cultural areas have been sometimes divided and regrouped into different development regions. The less structured cultural areas identified by Sandu are GL-IS, DJ-OT-MH, AB-HD, CJ-MS, MM-SM, AR-BH, TM-CS. The regrouping of counties proposed in 1997 by Hansen maintained the core areas and distributed counties from less structured cultural areas as to get balanced development regions in terms of population and economic development⁴⁸. The subsequent laws on regional development (Law 151/1998 and Law 315/2004) maintained the regrouping proposed by the initial study on the profiles of the Romanian regions⁴⁹.

Table 2

Cross-cutting Between Cultural Areas and Development Regions in 1997

| Regions | Cultural areas regrouped into development regions |
|----------------------|---|
| A | Cultural areas totally engulfed by development regions |
| Region 1, North-East | Botoşani (BT) - Vaslui (VS) |
| Region 2, South-East | Brăila (BR) - Buzău (BZ), Constanţa (CT) - Tulcea (TL) |
| Region 3, South | Argeş (AG) - Dâmboviţa (DB) - Prahova (PH), Teleorman (TR) - Giurgiu (GR) - Călăraşi (CL) - Ialomiţa (IL) |
| Region 4, South-West | Dolj (DJ) - Mehedinţi (MH) - Olt (OT), Vâlcea (VL) - Gorj (GJ) |
| Region 5, West | Caraş-Severin (CS) - Timiş (TM) |
| Region 6, North-West | Bistriţa-Năsăud (BN) - Sălaj (SJ), Maramureş (MM) - Satu-Mare (SM) |
| Region 7, Center | Braşov (BV) - Sibiu (SB), Covasna (CV) - Harghita (HR) |

⁴⁷ *Idem*, *Spaţiul social al tranziţiei*, Polirom, Iaşi, 1999, p. 146.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, "Social Disparities in the Regional Development and Policies of Romania", *International Review of Social Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1-30.

⁴⁹ Romanian Government, European Commission, *Carta verde. Politica de dezvoltare regională în România*, Phare Programme, Bucureşti, 1997.

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Region 8, Bucharest-Ilfov | Bucharest (B) - Ilfov (IF) |
| B | Cultural areas split between development regions |
| Region 1 and Region 2 | Vrancea (VN) - Bacău (BC) - Neamț (NT) - Suceava (SV) |
| Region 1 and Region 2 | Iași (IS) - Galați (GL) |
| Region 5 and Region 7 | Hunedoara (HD) - Alba (AB) |
| Region 5 and Region 6 | Arad (AR) - Bihor (BH) |
| Region 6 and Region 7 | Cluj (CJ) - Mureș (MS) |

The new debate on regionalization had a fresh new start in November 2012, following the general elections, and was the first open public debate on the matter. The previous step in regionalization was made with no public discussion, as a pure governmental issue. The debate offered the chance for many actors to put forward their claims and to challenge the central government, who was still in favour of keeping the eight development regions, but endowing them with serious competences, following a duly constitutional amendment, scheduled for 2013. This was the initial statement of Prime-minister Victor Ponta (president of the Social Democrat Party – PSD), and head of the winning opposition coalition formed by the Social Democrats and the National Liberal Party (PNL). Despite the fact that the ruling coalition between PSD and PNL dismantled in 2013 and thus disabled a constitutional revision in 2013 and a consistent regionalization in 2014, the incipient debate is instructive for the arguments put forward by actors.

The Governance and Regulation Model: A Framework for Analysis

The analysis of the arguments used by the actors is made through a framework that encompasses two distinctive and interactive processes, namely governance and regulation. The model is taken from Vasken⁵⁰ and from

⁵⁰ P. Vaesken, “Régulation/Gouvernance en économie sociale et solidaire: un modèle pour comprendre l’innovation sociale territoriale”, paper presented at the Conference “Politiques publiques, administration de proximité et cohésion sociale”, University Mohammed V, Rabat, Morocco, 7-8 May 2010.

Zafiropoulou and Vaesken⁵¹ and was build in order to understand complex processes occurring from the interaction between structures and agents on a given territory. The model takes into account the situation of a territory as the result of the situation of actors on both dimensions, namely governance and regulation. Relevant actors on the field may be understood as entrenched in a context ranging from a local or an emerging regulation to a highly centralized regulation, on one hand, and from an emerging governance to a highly situated governance, on the other hand. The model looks at how actors favour a top-down or a bottom-up approach when they territorially interact when engaged in collective action, and at how social norms are generated, negotiated and finally accepted by those actors.

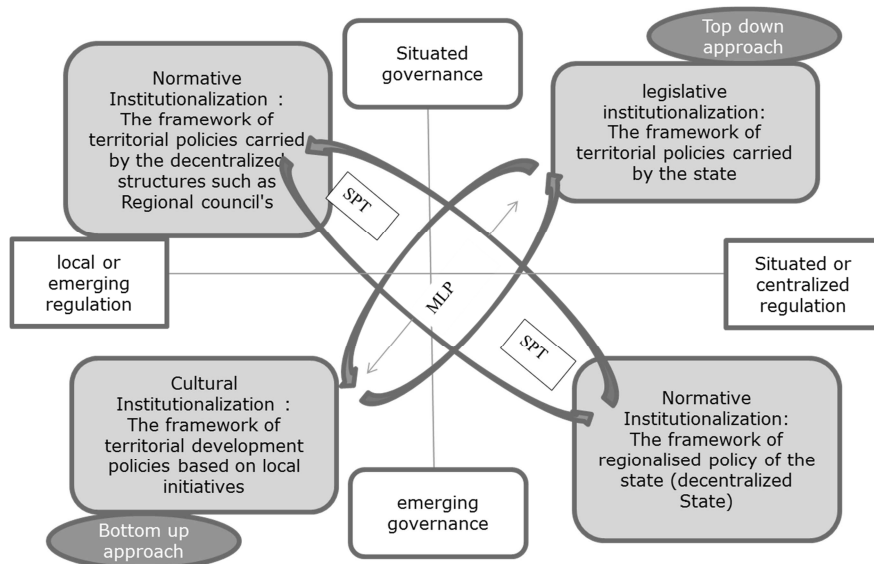


Figure 2. General Governance-Regulation/MLP/SPT Model⁵²

The model has been successfully tested for social issues and since then improved by Vaesken with the help of a new approach⁵³, taken from other two

⁵¹ M. Zafiropoulou, P. Vaesken, "Gestionarea politicilor sociale. Un model de guvernare și reglementare", in D. Dragoman, D.A. Popescu, (eds.), *Gestiunea politicilor publice teritoriale și integrare europeană*, LBUS Press, Sibiu, 2010, pp. 30-50.

⁵² The figure was drawn by P. Vaesken. See also P. Vaesken, "Régulation et gouvernance dans le champ de l'évaluation des politiques publiques, contribution du programme européen VALUES", paper presented at the Conference "Évaluation des Politiques Publiques. Modalités de Construction, d'Accompagnement et de Suivi", Rabat, Morocco, 24-25 November 2014.

⁵³ P. Vaesken, "Régulation et gouvernance...cit.".

models, the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP)⁵⁴ and Social Practice Theory (SPT)⁵⁵. MLP was favoured because it takes into account transitions, defined as regime shifts, which come about through interactive processes within and between different levels. Those levels are niches (locus for radical innovations), socio-technical regimes and an exogenous socio-technical landscape. They are all involved in transitions, which are not easy processes, mainly because existing regimes are largely defined by lock-in and path dependence⁵⁶. Therefore, according to Geels, innovation could influence over regimes only when external landscape developments create pressure on the regimes and provide windows of opportunity. This is extremely important for the analysis of the recent regionalization attempts, which ended in failure when such a window of opportunity was suddenly closed.

With SPT, the model focuses on a theory of action or on practice theories, in fact cultural theories that favour agents embedded in the social field, theories oriented towards human action and social order. As put by Reckwitz, those theories explain and understand actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain agents to interpret the world according to certain forms, and to behave in corresponding ways⁵⁷. Therefore, social order is embedded in collective cognitive and symbolic structures, a “shared knowledge” that generates a common way of understanding the social field, its structures and agents⁵⁸. By combining the two perspectives, the general model allows us to make essential distinctions between strategies of actors, with a top-down approach that would rather favour a normative or legislative institutionalization, in conflict with a bottom-up approach that would rather favour a cultural institutionalization, based on local initiatives which are negotiated by actors in the framework of emerging regulation and governance⁵⁹.

The Conflict of Interpretations: Local Actors and Regional Design

The analysis of actors’ strategies of negotiation, while pursuing the defence of local identities and interests, is made by a general survey of political positions expressed by parties or their elected officials, by officials from

⁵⁴ F.W. Geels, “Ontologies, Socio-Technical Transitions (to Sustainability), and Multi-Level Perspective”, *Research Policy*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2010, pp. 495-510.

⁵⁵ A. Reckwitz, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 243-263.

⁵⁶ F.W. Geels, “Ontologies, Socio-Technical Transitions...cit.”, p. 495.

⁵⁷ A. Reckwitz, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices...cit.”, p. 245.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

⁵⁹ P. Vaesken, “Régulation et gouvernance dans le champ de l’évaluation des politiques publiques...cit.”.

regional level (especially county-councillors) and by officials from the national level (ministers in government and top politicians, members of Parliament, from both ruling coalition and the opposition). The arguments are grouped according to the spatial distribution on a local – central scale, making the difference between the types of institutionalization involved and their top-down or bottom-up approach. We therefore make a distinction between central actors, as the central government and the central structures of parties from both governing coalition and the opposition, and more local actors, as local structures of parties and elected officials from regional and local administration.

With the initial proposal of prime-minister Ponta of keeping in place the existing development regions yet empowering them with serious competences and the apparent willingness of the government to seriously decentralize⁶⁰, one can witness in late 2012 and early 2013 a large share of local actors getting involved in a completely new process of normative negotiating the territorial design and the nature of territorial development policies. The government adopted in February 2013 a Memorandum for further regionalization and put in place expert working teams and even organized several debates with local elected officials from the current development regions⁶¹. The expert working team, the Consultative Council for Regionalization (CONREG), issued a report on the development disparities to be taken into account when setting up the principles of regionalization⁶². The coordinator of the report, Dumitru Sandu, emphasized the constraints related to tackling the development gaps not only between counties and historical provinces, but between urban and rural Romania. Taking into account several models (large, historical provinces engulfing several development regions; current development regions; 16 micro-regions or more, made by regrouping two or three existing counties), the report concluded with the relative advantages of the current grouping of counties in the existing development regions. Thus the eight development regions set up back in 1998 still maintain their net advantage of cultural homogeneity, functional configuration when it comes to assess the internal migration, economic competitiveness and demographic size. The proposed solution for regionalization is keeping the current development regions with their shape and county composition, with the possible merger of the region South with region

⁶⁰ F. Mincu, "Ponta: Regionalizarea României se va face în 2013 sau deloc", *Gazeta de Botoșani*, 23 December 2012, available at <http://www.gazetabt.ro/politica-ponta-regionalizarea-romaniei-se-va-face-in-2013-sau-deloc.html>, accessed 12 July 2016.

⁶¹ *Ziua de Cluj*, "Guvernul a dat liber la regionalizare", 19 February 2013, available at <http://ziuadecj.realitatea.net/politica/guvernul-a-dat-liber-la-regionalizare--106764.html>, accessed 12 July 2016.

⁶² D. Sandu, "Disparități și fluxuri în fundamentarea social-economică a regionalizării administrative a României", available at <http://regionalizare.mdrap.ro/2013/04/21/disparitati-si-fluxuri-in-fundamentarea-social-economica-a-regionalizarii-administrative-a-romaniei/>, accessed 09 October 2016.

Bucharest-Ilfov. This last move would be recommended for a balanced development of both regions, since Bucharest, as Romania's capital-city, attracted human resources from all the neighbouring counties, without a proper budget equilibration through regional redistribution. The conclusions of the report were the starting base of the debate initiated by the government.

This governmental openness was totally different from the earlier steps made by the central government a decade ago. The possibility of large regional autonomy for large territorial units, as the former historical regions, made a former prime-minister to label it as an idea launched by minds gone off the rails, making Romanians lock themselves up in their own provinces⁶³. The benevolent attitude of the central government in 2012 encouraged actors to generate spaces of dialogue, where norms and negotiated results could be validated.

The position expressed by the PSD-PNL governing coalition, under the banner of the victorious Social-Liberal Union (USL) in the 2012 general elections, was not significantly different from that officially expressed by the former governing coalition formed by the Liberal-Democrat Party (PDL) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) between 2009 and 2011. The former attempt of redesigning regional administration failed in 2011 due to a serious divergence of opinions between PDL and UDMR regarding the autonomy of counties inhabited in large shares by ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania⁶⁴. The existence of counties inhabited by ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania is most often a relevant electoral and political factor in Romanian politics⁶⁵. Due to the difficult negotiation within the governing coalition, UDMR put forward its own proposal for regional design. The project multiplies the current eight development regions by two, proposing 16 regions by changing the composition of them, but without crossing the historical borders between former historical regions. Most noticeably, it regroups the counties inhabited by ethnic Hungarians (CV-HR-MS) into one region, in the heart of Transylvania, and the counties less inhabited by ethnic Hungarians (the internal ethnic Hungarian diaspora) into distinct regions (BH-SJ-SM and CJ-BN-MM). Moreover, UDMR proposed that five macro-regions would engulf the 16 regions, with less care about the former historical borders. New regions 4, 5, 6 and 7 would form the macro-region I, regions 1, 2, and 3 the macro-region II, regions 8, 9 and 10 the macro-region III, regions 11, 12 and 13 the macro-

⁶³ A.M. Dobre, "The Dynamics of Partisan Adaptation to Europeanization...cit."

⁶⁴ D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghîță, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle...cit."

⁶⁵ A. Zamfira, D. Dragoman, "Le vote (non)ethnique en Roumanie, 2000-2008. Les performances électorales des partis des minorités allemande et hongroise en perspective comparée", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, pp. 127-156; A. Zamfira, "Methodological Limitations...cit."

region IV. Finally, all the counties from regions where ethnic Hungarians leave in significant shares would be part of macro-region V, which would regroup the Hungarian core and diaspora counties from newly designed regions 14, 15 and 16.

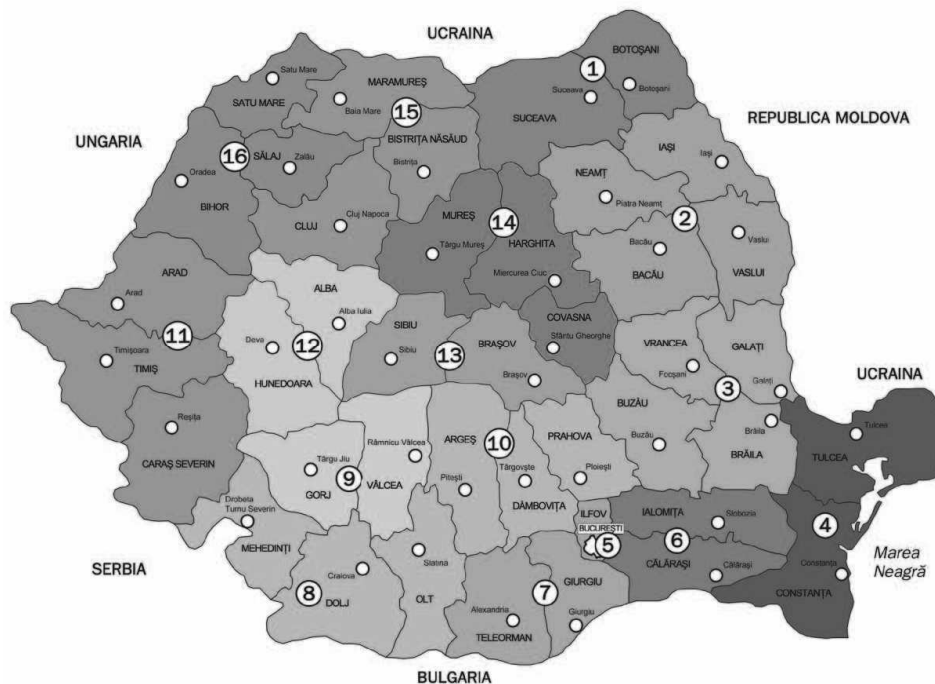


Figure 3. The Regional Design Proposed by UDMR⁶⁶

Focusing most prominently on that special region, UDMR is less a central actor and more a local actor, emphasizing the logic of bottom-up pressure on the existing regime and trying to maximize the window of opportunity. With its project rejected by the partner coalition in 2011⁶⁷, UDMR refused to make the necessary steps towards an agreement and the whole regionalization process was postponed⁶⁸. When the debate was reopened in late 2012, this bold proposal made by UDMR was an incentive for many local actors to put forward their own proposals. We make a special emphasis here on this proposal as a clear example of initiative aimed at combining top-down strategies (as part of the

⁶⁶ Map available at <https://transildania.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/regionalizarea-3-delimitarea-regiunilor/>, accessed 12 July 2016.

⁶⁷ D. Bochsler, E. Szöcsik, "The Forbidden Fruit of Federalism: Evidence from Romania and Slovakia", *West European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 426-446.

⁶⁸ D. Dragoman, B. Gheorghită, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy and Ethnic Struggle...cit.".

governing coalition) and bottom-up initiatives (as key local player in one distinctive region), namely an effort for converting a cultural institutionalization into a binding legislative institutionalization, as predicted by the MLP model.

The bottom-up initiative of UDMR is to be seen in the November 2013 decision to organize a referendum, set up by the Harghita county council dominated by UDMR councillors, in order to have a citizen consultation regarding the future design of a new development region, made up by the current Harghita, Covasna and Mureș counties⁶⁹. With its capital city at Târgu-Mureș (the capital-city of the current Mureș county), the proposed region would thus separate from the powerful influence of heavily industrialized Brașov neighbouring county. Any other association between Brașov and less developed counties as Covasna and Harghita would lead to increasing underdevelopment of the latter, with serious competitive advantages of the former⁷⁰. The UDMR proposal for organizing a referendum has been signed by no less than 40,000 people from the three counties, according to the president of Harghita county, Borbely Csaba, yet it was assumed only by Harghita county council, while Mureș county council rejected the proposal. The different outcome of the initiative in Mureș and Harghita expresses different regionalization strategies of UDMR and PSD-PNL governing coalition (more powerful among county councillors in Mureș than in Harghita), as well as ethnic strategies, since all the Hungarian parties represented in Harghita county council, not only UDMR, backed up the initiative.

With the firm proposal made by UDMR, many local and regional actors found the opportunity to speak out in defence of their own identity and interests. The most active local actors were those interested in negotiating favourable regrouping of counties as to avoid subordinate administrative positions. As UDMR has tried to avoid diluting the ethnic composition and the electoral support from core counties by the least possible mixing with counties largely inhabited by ethnic Romanians (BV, SB, AB or CJ, BN, MM), local actors from many cultural areas tried to assure primacy in two distinct ways. On the one hand, some of those actors (local branches of national parties, local elected officials) tended to split from their fellow pair county from the cultural area and to look for a solid arrangement which distributes each county into a different region. This was the case of PNL Bihor⁷¹, who reshaped existing development regions (as shown in Figure 1) by carefully isolating

⁶⁹ J. Benedek, H. Bajtalan, "Recent Regionalization Discourses and Projects in Romania with Special Focus on Szekelyland", *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, no. 44, 2015, pp. 23-41.

⁷⁰ I. Tudor, "Consiliul Județean Harghita a aprobat organizarea referendumului pe tema regionalizării", *romaniatv.net*, 27 November 2013, available at http://www.romaniatv.net/consiliul-judetean-harghita-a-aprobat-organizarea-referendumului-pe-tema-regionalizarii_111377.html, accessed 09 October 2016.

⁷¹ *România Liberă*, "Politicienii din Bihor susțin în comun o variantă de regionalizare în care Oradea să fie centrul", 31 January 2013, available at <http://www.romanialibera.ro/politica/institutii/politicienii-din-bihor-sustin-in-comun-o-varianta-de-regionalizare-in-care-oradea-sa-fie-centrul-292078>, accessed 12 July 2016.

their own county (BH) from the influence of their rivals, Arad county (its pair from the cultural area BH-AR) and Cluj county. This is an industrialized and highly educated and economically competitive neighbouring county, which overshadows Bihor county in the current composition of Development Region 5 North-West. The same conflict is to be noticed in other regions. The opposition between the county elected officials from Sibiu and Braşov made the governing party PSD to propose the reshaping of the current Development Region V (Center) and the formation of a new region (SB-AB-HD), leaving Braşov county in the territorial limits of another region (BV-MS-HR-CV)⁷². This is a clear success of local actors' strategy to overrule a centralized regulation by an emerging regulation, issued on local grounds and often with the support of a local coalition made by elected officials from various parties, as indicated in the Figure 2 with respect to the SPT model.



Figure 4. The Regional Design Proposed by PSD in 2013⁷³

On the other hand, when it proved impossible to split from fellow counties

⁷² L. Pârvu, "Harta regionalizării în varianta PSD", HotNews.ro, 30 August 2013, available at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-15475279-victor-ponta-anuntat-regionalizarea-face-prin-proiect-lege-trebuie-formam-regiunile-inainte-primi-statutul-constitutional.htm>, accessed 12 July 2016.

⁷³ Map available at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-15475279-victor-ponta-anuntat-regionalizarea-face-prin-proiect-lege-trebuie-formam-regiunile-inainte-primi-statutul-constitutional.htm>, accessed 13 July 2016.

from the same cultural areas, the strategy moved from the shaping of the region to the designation of the future capital-city. In the same move to appease local elected officials from the current Development Region 3 (South), the same Social-Democrat party favoured Ploiești (PH) instead of Pitești (AG). Entrenched in an offensive against competing regional maps and against the interest of neighbouring counties, even they were headed by fellow PSD party leaders, the president of the Prahova (PH) county-council, Mircea Cosma, issued his own proposal. This proposal favoured 12 regions and Bucharest, Romania's capital-city, instead of the current eight development regions, with Ploiești, the current capital-city of his own county as one of those future regions⁷⁴. He was expected that the regions be first reshaped, and then endowed with real powers and financial autonomy, following the required constitutional amendment. In the same time, the Social-Democrat party favoured Focșani (VN) instead of Brăila (BR), for the future capital-city of a newly shaped region (VN-BZ-GL-BR)⁷⁵. Noticing the very complicated process of negotiating diverging regional geographies⁷⁶, which could prove an endless task, the prime-minister Ponta declared during a party meeting that this would be the last concession of the central government to party local elected officials⁷⁷.

Before that, a PSD senator proposed to the party another project. Back in 2011, Mugurel Surupăceanu proposed that newly designed regions to engulf current counties regardless of the most important constraint until then, namely their belonging to distinct historical provinces, with different ethnic background and different past experiences. The project was merely a response to the governmental intention to boost regionalization by transforming development regions into fully functional regions. According to Surupăceanu, the governing coalition PDL-UDMR was looking at concentrating power by dissolving the existing counties and replacing them with a limited number of larger regions, yet maintaining the current regional development gap⁷⁸. The most important

⁷⁴ *Committee of the Regions*, news, "Mircea Cosma: ar trebui ca România să fie împărțită în minimum 12 regiuni, plus capitala," 03 September 2013, available at http://www.cor.europa.eu/ro/news/regional/Pages/mircea-cosma-trebuie-romania-sa-fie-impartita-minimum-12-regiuni-capitala.aspx?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Romania-September-2013, accessed 09 October 2016.

⁷⁵ Realitatea.net, "Harta regionalizării în varianta PSD: Cum va fi redesenată România", 31 August 2013, available at http://www.realitatea.net/harta-regionalizarii-in-varianta-psd-cum-va-fi-redesenata-romania_1259804.html, accessed 12 July 2016.

⁷⁶ A. Ghinea, "Ponta nu este de acord cu împărțirea României în opt regiuni", Ziare.com, 16 August 2013, available at <http://www.ziare.com/victor-ponta/premier/ponta-nu-este-de-acord-cu-impartirea-romaniei-in-opt-regiuni-1251825>, accessed 13 July 2016.

⁷⁷ Ziare.com, "Acum toată lumea are pe cine să dea vina, pe mine", 30 August 2013, available at <http://www.ziare.com/victor-ponta/premier/ponta-despre-regionalizare-acum-toata-lumea-are-pe-cine-sa-dea-vina-pe-mine-1254396>, accessed 13 July 2016.

⁷⁸ Ziare.com, "Surupăceanu, despre reorganizarea pe regiuni: PDL încearcă strângerea chingii înainte de alegeri", 7 June 2011, available at <http://m.ziare.com/mugurel->

criterion to be taken into account would thus be GDP in the region. The regrouping of counties would aim at splitting and recomposing the existing development regions as to get the most balanced regional development model. Moreover, by splitting the current development region Center and regrouping the counties largely inhabited by ethnic Hungarians alongside counties largely inhabited by ethnic Romanians, the proposed design would have diluted Szeklerland, a secondary aimed assumed by the author of the proposal. Despite the emphasis on balanced regional development, the project's bold design for regrouping counties regardless of their past history turned it into a pure personal proposal, with no further party backup.

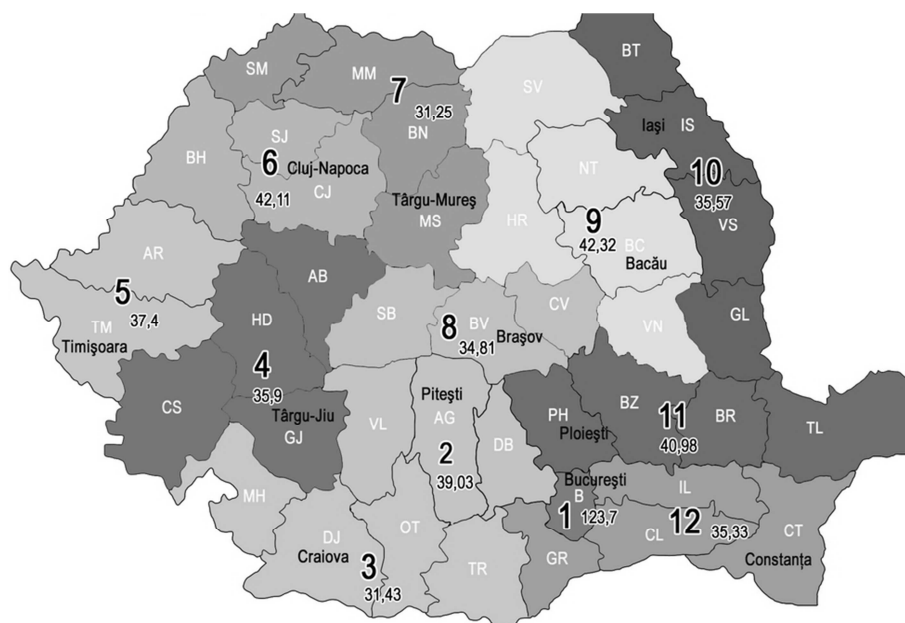


Figure 5. The Regional Design Proposed by Surupăceanu to USL in 2011⁷⁹

Probably the most relevant strategy for defending local identity and interests is to be noticed in the case of Sibiu, where the city mayor entered a political national career that would finally turn him into the president of Romania. Head of a cultural organization of ethnic Germans called the Democrat Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR), Klaus Johannis won four

surupaceanu/surupaceanu-despre-reorganizarea-pe-regiuni-pdl-incearca-strangerea-chingii-inainte-de-alegeri-1099736, accessed 08 October 2016.

⁷⁹ Map available at <http://www.ziare.com/mugurel-surupaceanu/psd/surupaceanu-despre-reorganizarea-pe-regiuni-pdl-incearca-strangerea-chingii-inainte-de-alegeri-1099736>, accessed 08 October 2016.

times on a row the mayoral elections in Sibiu⁸⁰. Those electoral victories made Sibiu a distinct political space, a special case in ethnic cooperation in Romania⁸¹, and a declaration of Europeanization in a region still marked by ethnic tensions⁸². Despite a brief episode when he was proposed as prime-minister candidate in 2009 by a PSD-PNL parliamentary coalition but was not appointed by the Romanian president⁸³, Iohannis was a rather local figure. Praised for his abilities and competence in turning a medium-size town in southern Transylvania into a European Capital of Culture in 2007 and a hotspot for tourism and foreign investment during his mayoral mandates⁸⁴, he was still the president of an ethnic cultural association which was politically competing locally⁸⁵.

The debate opened in 2012 regarding the new regional design found him as the mayor of Sibiu, facing the threat of being politically subordinated to a supplementary administrative layer, the newly designed region, whose composition and capital-city were negotiated by central and local actors within the governing coalition PSD-PNL, with a high risk of designating Brașov as the future regional capital-city. The opportunity he seized in 2013 was to leave the direction of the city and of FDGR in good hands and to climb very fast in the hierarchy of PNL, as vice-president of the party and head of the regionalization commission within the Liberal party. As coalition partner, he was claiming the direction of the Interior ministry and the position of vice-prime-minister. By this, he would have been in a much better position when the new regional design would have been finally decided. The refusal of his fellow coalition party (PSD) to appoint Iohannis as interior minister and vice-prime-minister finally led to a coalition breakdown in 2013 and an astonishing victory for Klaus Iohannis, as PNL president, to the presidential elections in November 2014. Although regionalization was postponed due to coalition bargaining permanent failures⁸⁶ and the overruling by the Constitutional Court of Romania

⁸⁰ D. Dragoman, "The Success of the German Democratic Forum in Sibiu: Non-Ethnic Voting, Political Neutrality and Economic Performance", *Transitions*, vol. 53, nos. 1-2, 2013, pp. 97-117.

⁸¹ D. Dragoman, "Ethnic Relations in Mixed Communities...cit.".

⁸² C. Cercel, "Philo-Germanism without Germans in Romania after 1989", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2015, pp. 811-830.

⁸³ D. Dragoman, "Post-Accession Backsliding: Non-Ideological Populism and Democratic Setbacks in Romania", *South-East European Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2013, pp. 27-46.

⁸⁴ F. Vasiliu, D. Dragoman, "Evaluating the Economic Impact of Large Cultural Events. A Case-Study of Sibiu, European Capital of Culture 2007", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. IX, no. 2, 2009, pp. 317-327.

⁸⁵ A. Zamfira, "Le rôle de la solidarité ethnique aux élections locales de Sibiu", *Transitions*, vol. 53, nos. 1-2, 2013, pp. 121-140.

⁸⁶ Ziare.com, "Iohannis îngroapă regionalizarea lui Dragnea: Avem timp până în 2022", 01 August 2013, available at <http://www.ziare.com/klaus-ihannis/primar-sibiu/ihannis->

in January 2014 of a law regarding some decentralization measures⁸⁷, the strategy used by a local actor for securing a better position and use a window of opportunity, opened by the willingness of the central government to publically discuss the regionalization issue, in order to get the best outcomes from a regulation process is instructive for the model put forward in this paper. The decision took in August 2013 by PSD, the coalition partner of PNL, to move from a regionalization with eight regions to a regionalization with ten regions, including an additional separate Sibiu region, could be partially seen as a success strategy of this strong local actor to influence on an overall highly centralized regulation system in Romania⁸⁸.

Conclusions

The current regionalization projects and debates in Romania, although a very slow process, could be seen a case-study for regionalization attempts in a highly centralized state and for the way a central government faces competing regional geographies. Adopting the French type of national state, Romania tried for almost a century to culturally homogenize and to politically unify the national territory. The European integration, not by his institutional pressure, but by the development opportunities provided by structural development funds, could influence the current situation and provide incentive for local actors and for social innovation, as acknowledged by the Multi-Level Perspective Theory. Actors embedded in local settings may use the new situation and try to impose innovation fostered in a specific niche to the central regime level. By doing so, actors get entrenched in profound processes of negotiation of norms and behaviours, expressing tensions between local and centralized regulation and governance, as agents working for a common understanding of the social field, as acknowledged by the Social Practice Theory.

The general model combining the governance and regulation model with two other theories (MLP and SPT) was an effort to unravel the overall pattern of interaction between political and social actors in the complex process of

ingroapa-regionalizarea-lui-dragnea-avem-timp-pana-in-2022-sa-tot-lucram-la-regiuni-1249349, accessed 13 July 2016.

⁸⁷ HotNews.ro, "Motivare CCR: Legea descentralizării este neconstituțională deoarece nu prevede măsuri pregătitoare, studii de impact și standard de cost", available at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-16603560-motivare-ccr-legea-descentralizarii-este-neconstitutionala-deoarece-nu-prevede-masuri-pregatitoare-studii-impact-standard-de-cost.htm>, accessed 10 October 2016.

⁸⁸ Ziare.com, "Johannis: Nu va exista regionalizare nici anul acesta, nici anul viitor", 01 October 2013, available at <http://www.ziare.com/klaus-johannis/pnl/iohannis-nu-va-exista-regionalizare-nici-anul-acesta-nici-anul-viitor-1260028>, accessed 13 July 2016.

regionalization. The Romanian case is instructive for the way regionalization could occur in a centralized state when the central government, as key factor, is willing to foster a genuine process of decentralization, or when the European conditionality may force him to do so. The conflicts between local actors regarding various regional design options, underlining deep relations of power and influence, made the central government reluctant during the regionalization process. The governmental initiative from 2012 is to be taken however as a step forward towards a complete redesigning of regional administration and the empowerment of local actors, in the logic of a sustainable and responsible regional autonomy in Romania.

The regionalization issue will be once again on the agenda, following the late autumn general elections in 2016⁸⁹. Since very little has been changed in the overall political system balance (with PSD as potential governing party and Klaus Johannis as Romanian president in office), scholarly research will have to pay attention to the complex set of factors that previously undermined regionalization. On the one hand, the increasing regional disparities will force the central government to look for the most suitable mechanisms for regional development balance and equity. On the other hand, ethnic and identity issues, especially with respect to a future autonomous region in Transylvania, inhabited by large shares of ethnic Hungarians, will represent a challenge to the Romanian national and centralized state, which will celebrate its centenary in 2018. With the additional pressure from more structural factors as the proper spending of the EU cohesion funds, successful regionalization will be a milestone in Romanian politics.

⁸⁹ Marilena Pop, “Dragnea: În 2017 reluăm proiectul regionalizării”, *Indiscret*, 18 May 2016, available at <http://www.indiscret.ro/articol-dragnea-n-2017-reluam-proiectul-regionalizarii>, accessed 13 July 2016.